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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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What a dreary week! Not a ray of sunshine all week - nothing but rainy, cold, and damp days. Needless to say, I got very little done all week, especially outside. It was the type of week in which I had little motivation other than to run a bunch of errands. I did manage to do some household "maintenance" things though. I finally got around to changing my phone service. Over the years, I've had multiple phone lines because I used to run the Toad Hall BBS. And, because my wife and I are online often, I had another line to go online without tying up the house line. Well, since we upgraded our cell phone service, we no longer need long distance service on our house phone. Then, I finally entered the new age and subscribed to broadband service. So, I certainly don't need the extra phone lines and we don't have to worry about tying up the house line while surfing the web. (at least once I hook everything up!). So, we'll save some money and be able to get rid of dial-up service and see what high-speed internet use is all about! I can't wait.

I still haven't made it out to the golf course yet! I was supposed to play today, but the weather nixed our outing. Hopefully, the weather will improve soon; I'm scheduled to play at least once next week, with another outing still tentative.

I was going to continue my thoughts from last week regarding that New York City employee who was in trouble due to surging the web while on the job. Well, as you'll see later on in this week's issue, he was fired. After reading more about this topic, I really gotta say that I don't have much sympathy for this guy - I don't have a problem with the decision to fire him. Had he not received numerous warnings, or stopped the activity, I might think otherwise. Additionally, I think that this judge went overboard with his rationale that internet use was akin to reading a newspaper or using the phone. Unless it's job-related, I don't think so!

Until next time...

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
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CCAG 2006 Show

It’s a new year. which means a new CCAG Show!

Buy, sell, trade, play, and see classic video games, computers, peripherals, memorabilia, and more at the Classic Computing and Gaming Show (CCAG) on May 27, 2006 (and again in October, 2006) at the National Guard Armory, 3520 Grove Ave. Lorain, Ohio from 5:00 PM - 9:00 PM. Vendors, clubs, and collectors will be displaying and selling their retrogaming and retrocomputing goods, from Pong and Atari to Nintendo, Apple and IBM to Commodore and everything in between with many set up for you to play with and explore. We have 5000+ square feet of space. Help us fill it all up!

For more information please go to http://www.ccagshow.com/

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. There’ve been some disturbing developments in the past couple of days. Yes, I’m talking about politics, and no, I’m not going to go off on a tear about how Big Brother is not only looking over our shoulders but telling you that he’s doing it for our own good, and to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Oops. Was that out loud? Sorry. <grin>

Well, things are fairly quiet on the Atari front these days, but there’s and interesting thread or two, so let’s take a look, shall we?

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

’Emil’ asks for help with ’extra pieces’ left over after re-assembling his Falcon:

"I disassembled an atari falcon and I am left with two black spacers and a copper spacer. Not sure where they should be placed on the motherboard. Can someone help or provide photos/diagram for me?"

Ronald Hall tells Emil:

"That almost sounds like the "risers" that hold up the floppy drive, except there are 3 of the black spacers for that.

Check to see if the narrow end of each fits into the bottom of the floppy, and the wider end fits into the motherboard itself.

Other than that, I’m afraid I don’t know without actually seeing them."

Coda adds:

"These are definitely the floppy drive holders. One of them is brass, which provides an earth to the floppy. You know it never crossed my mind, but these things must have cost atari a fortune to make..."

Emil re-traces his steps and posts:

"Thanks guys - that’s where they go."

’Oliver’ asks for help with info on Matrix video cards:

"I can’t find a page listing the specs of this card nor it’s upgraded functions. Can anyone help?"

’ProToS’ tells Oliver:

"go to
< http://www.holleman.demon.nl/matrix/ >
you will find driver and some info."

Louis Holleman adds:

"Sometimes I think: why am I keeping this site up? Today I think: keep it going, Louie.

3 users a year ain’t that bad."

Rory McMahon asks about online docs:

"I have a set of these Atari ST Developer binders and diskettes...

Has anyone scanned these in yet? Did they have errors in them? What is the status of owning them?

I have a duplex scanner so scanning them wouldn’t be too bad. Is there any call for them?

I’ve tried to OCR a page. There were too many spelling errors to correct. PDF would have to be the way to go (unless somebody has nimble fingers and a TON of free time)."

Lonny Pursell cuts us out of the loop and tells Rory:

"I replied via e-mail."

Rory tells Lonny:

"Here is the scoop:

Ok, got a chance to look at the docs and compared them to your page of document and specs.

It looks that the set of binders I have is the original atari dev kit. The date on the 'Thanks for the interest in Atari ST" is 09/27/85.

It has the following:

Software:
Utilities Disk
Compiler Disk
Linker Disk
RCS (Resource Construction Set) ALPHA version
MicroEMACS

Documentation:
Non-Disclosure Agreement
Screen Resolution Memo
6 copies of the Software Performance Report
Introduction to GEM Programming (references to IBM-PC)
GEM VDI Programmers Guide Volume 1
GEM AES Programmers Guide Volume 2
GEM DOS Specification, rev 13 May16,1985
Hitchhikers Guide to the BIOS Sep 12,1985
Line-A Technical Reference Manual Sep 9,1985
Intelligent Keyboard Specification Feb 26,1985
BIOS Listing Jul 9,1985
DRI "C" Language Programmers Guide
DRI Programmers Guide (Assembler, Linker, and Debugger)
Kermit Users Guide Apr 5,1985
Atari Hardware Specifications Jan 24,1985
Programming the DMA Channel and the 1772
MIDI address page to write for more information
Printer Specifications (STC504, SMM804, SDM 124)
Cartridge Slot Specifications
Sound Chip Specs
MK68901 Specs
ST Schematic

Also there was an envelope with

Mega ST Internal Expansion Bus Documentation
S.A.L.A.D. Still another line A Document
International Software News #5 from Atari Corp

Thats it!"

Coda adds:

"They didn't take care of the spelling, and neither the technical details. They are only good for historical purposes, there are many other technical references that are accurate and complete. It's a similar story with the Falcon developer docs that I have."

David Wade adds his thoughts:

"But it would still be nice to see them, for historical purposes.
How about getting them put on www.bitsavers.org"

Edward Baiz asks:

"Is there a program for the Atari that will play WMV files?"

Patrice Mandin tells Edward:

"Didier Mequignon ported the Unix mplayer program a while ago, so maybe it could play some WMV files. However most codecs required are win32/x86 only, and on Linux/x86 for example, mplayer uses wine as a library to load win32 codecs."

'Dave' asks about my favorite backup app for the ST:

"Does Diamond Back 3 support image backup to ZIP drives?
I have 2.51 which only supports floppies."

Rory McMahon tells Dave:

"Not sure about ZIP drive, but I have had some Seagate SCSI tape drives work with it."

Dave asks Rory:

"Which version have you got? I guess if it can do tape units it should be able to do zips. Mine just has the option to image backup to floppy."

Alan Hourihane asks about a boot selector:

"Is superboot still the best boot selector? Are there any others out there that people rank?"

'Phantomm' tells Alan:

"There are a lot of these. I have used SuperBoot on all types of Ataris including the Falcon with a CT2B, and it works well.

However, there are a few more for the Falcon, that have special features.

I believe one was called Start em Up, but not sure if It was for all Ataris or not, but I believe it was."

Fidel-Sebastian Junrichse-Lara adds:

"What about McBoot from John McLoud?"

Martin Byttebier adds his thoughts:

"Personally I prefer Xboot. I’m using it since the early days. Xboot never have let me down. I’m still using it on the Hades."

Lonny Pursell throws in his preference:

"I use Mouse Boot myself."

Well folks, that’s it for this time around. Think about what I said at the beginning of the column... think about it the next time you pick up the phone. PAY ATTENTION to that man behind the curtain! I guess the NSA reads this column once in a while, because they’re listening to what’s going on when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - PlayStation 3 Details!
PS3 Price Ranges!
’Halo 3’ at E3!
And much more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Sony to Divulge PlayStation 3 Details

The ongoing battle for living room dominance resumes this week at the video game industry’s largest annual conference.

Two days before the Electronic Entertainment Expo begins in Los Angeles, Sony Corp. was scheduled to divulge more details on its upcoming PlayStation 3 video game console in a Monday afternoon news conference at its movie studios in Culver City, Calif.

Rivals Nintendo Co. and Microsoft Corp., with their competing Wii and Xbox 360 systems, plan similar news conferences Tuesday.

Sony executives have touted what they claim are competitive advantages, such as the PS3’s speedy "Cell" processor, the console’s Blu-ray disk format for high-definition video and an online network that purportedly

will include videoconferencing and micropayments.

But the PS3 already has been pushed back from a spring to a fall release, and key information such as the exact launch date, price and games lineup have yet to be announced.

In a recent report, American Technology Research predicted the PS3 will retail for $499 $100 more than the current top-of-the-line Xbox 360.

The Xbox 360 got an early start on the next-generation console wars and has sold 3.2 million units worldwide since it was released in November. But until recently, Microsoft has been unable to meet demand.

Pricing and other details also are sketchy on Nintendo’s Wii (pronounced "We"), which uses a unique TV-style remote controller that can be waved around to manipulate action on the screen.

This year’s E3 conference comes with the industry in financial turmoil as it transitions from older systems to the new consoles. Much of it has been blamed on consumers’ desire to hold out for the PS3 and Wii.

The period has been especially brutal for key game makers like Electronic Arts Inc., which recently lost $16 million, or 5 cents per share, in its fiscal fourth quarter. EA predicted video game sales industrywide would be flat to down 5 percent in 2006.

According to market research firm NPD Group, overall video game sales dropped 5 percent to $7 billion in the United States last year.

During last year’s E3, Sony executives proudly showed pretty video clips of supposed PS3 games but very little in the way of actual game play. The same was true for the Nintendo Wii and the Xbox 360.

Expect a more hands-on approach this year, with attendees finally getting a chance to play games on the new systems, said Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, which organizes E3.

"You’ll be able to kick the tires and see what’s under the hood," he said. "It’s no longer about specs. This is about performance, this is about ’What do you have to show me?’"

Sony To Launch PS3 at $499

Sony Corp. said on Monday it would begin selling its PlayStation 3 video game console in November for $499 in North America, challenging Microsoft Corp.’s early dominance in the market for next-generation machines.

Sony won the previous generation battle as its PS2 outsold the original Xbox, but Microsoft is expected to capitalize on a head start to at least gain ground this time with its Xbox 360 console in a global gaming industry expected to generate about $30 billion in revenue this year.

Sony’s standard PS3 will have a 20-gigabyte hard drive and debut on November 11 in Japan and November 17 in most of the rest of the world. The unit will retail for 59,800 yen ($536) in Japan and 499 euros ($634) in Europe.

The Japanese electronics giant also showed off a motion-sensitive wireless controller, a feature similar to the controllers being offered by Nintendo Co. Ltd. in its upcoming Wii game machine.

Wedbush analyst Michael Pachter said the price was competitive and the controller would be reason enough for many gamers to wait for the PS3 rather than buy Microsoft's Xbox 360, which was launched late last year.

"I think they are going to kick Microsoft's butt," he said after Sony showed off the controller in a news conference ahead of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, the largest video game show in the world which begins later this week.

Video game fans have been waiting to see what Sony would offer, and especially at what price, in order to decide whether to wait for the PS3 or buy an Xbox 360 now.

Sony will also sell a PS3 with a 60-gigabyte hard drive for $599 in the United States. All Sony's units will include a Blu-ray high-definition DVD player. Microsoft's premium Xbox 360 package, which does not include an advanced DVD player and has a 20-gigabyte hard drive, costs $400, by comparison.

"As just a game console it is expensive, but not if you think about it as an entertainment center," said Koichi Ogawa, chief portfolio manager at Daiwa SB Investments. "The price may be somewhat tough for Sony. If you consider the costs, the price probably should be higher."

The larger hard drive allows users to store more games, music and other downloaded content onto the PS3, while some software developers said the extra storage capacity allowed the machine to load games faster.

Sony's Bluetooth-powered motion-sensitive wireless controller is shaped like the controller for the current generation machine, but the advanced controller can shift objects in games when a player moves the unit, without pushing buttons. In a demonstration, a virtual duck lifted out of a tub of water when the controller was jerked upward.

Sony expects to hit the market with 2 million PS3 consoles at launch and a total of 4 million by the end of December 2006. Analysts expect Microsoft to ship up to 8 million Xbox 360 units before Sony launches the PS3.

Ken Kutaragi, Sony's game unit head, also known as the "father of the PlayStation," told Reuters that this would be a huge year for the video game industry and Microsoft's early advantage was not a great concern.

"We have not paid much attention to market share in the past, and that is still the case," Kutaragi said on the sidelines of the Sony news conference.

The success of the PS3 is crucial for Sony as a company.

At stake is not only continued dominance in the game industry but leadership in the next generation of DVDs, the commercial viability of the Cell processor that powers the PS3 and possibly control over the future living-room electronics around the world.

It's also an expensive bet.

Tokyo-based Sony plans to take a 100 billion yen operating loss at its game

division in the current fiscal year due to costs related to the PS3 launch. Game machines manufacturers often lose money on the initial sale, but recoup those losses over the life of the product through software sales.

"Unless there are some amazing launch titles that turn up in the next six months, I think it’s going to be pretty tough going for Sony," said Hiroshi Kamide, game analyst for KBC Securities. "It’s still going to lose money hand over fist at these prices."

Xbox 360 HD DVD Player Due for Holidays

Microsoft Corp. will release an HD DVD player for its Xbox 360 video game machine in time for the 2006 holiday season and will have 10 million of its next-generation consoles to market before its rivals debut their new systems, company executives said on Tuesday.

Microsoft got a head start when it released the Xbox 360 in November. Rivals Sony Corp. and Nintendo Co. Ltd plan to debut their new gaming machines, the PlayStation 3 and the Wii, later this year.

There will be a total of 160 titles for Xbox 360 available in time for the holidays, Peter Moore, head of Microsoft’s game business, said at a press conference ahead of the Electronic Entertainment Expo this week in Los Angeles.

Moore also said "Grand Theft Auto 4," the latest installment in the blockbuster urban-action series, would be available in October for Xbox 360.

Sony, Microsoft Face Off at Video Game Show

This year, Sony Corp. must prove it’s not "game over" against Microsoft Corp.

At the biggest video game show of the year, Sony, which has dominated the console market with its PlayStation 2, must show gamers reason to wait six more months for its PS3, even though Microsoft’s next-generation Xbox 360 already sits temptingly on stores shelves.

The video game industry is closing in on $30 billion in annual revenue, with U.S. sales pacing Hollywood’s box office receipts. Its young male audience is sought after by advertisers on television and the Internet.

The newest heavyweight, Microsoft, last year launched the first of a new crop of high-powered machines with super-realistic graphics with its Xbox 360. At the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, this week in Los Angeles, current leader Sony is expected to unveil details of the PS3.

Sony plans to launch its PlayStation 3 console in November, a year after Microsoft, and its margin of error is razor-thin.

Game play on the Microsoft and Sony consoles will be virtually the same, but each machine brings a weapon to the battle that could turn the tide, analysts say.

"There is a very different playing field this time around. One thing we've learned is never apply the rules of the last generation to the next one," said Peer Schneider, vice president of content publishing at IGN Entertainment, a unit of Fox Interactive Media.

Sony promises to bundle a Blu-ray, high-definition video player into the PS3 right out of the gate, while Microsoft plans to eventually offer an add-on external drive for HD DVD, a rival format to Blu-ray.

Microsoft holds the clear advantage online with Xbox Live, a service that connects users to the Web through its consoles to compete, chat and download games, videos and other content. Sony plans to debut a new online services with the PS3.

"Sony really has a lot of catch-up to do with Xbox Live," Schneider said.

Microsoft could have up to 8 million Xbox 360s in the hands of gamers even before Sony finds its way to the market, according to analysts' estimates.

"We expect Sony to come out as the winner, but they have to stick to their November schedule," said David Mercer, principal analyst at independent research firm Strategy Analytics Inc.

"Sony can't afford to miss that this time around. If they do, the Xbox 360 lead could become unassailable," Mercer said.

Sony already delayed the release of its new high-tech gaming device, which was originally slated for a spring debut in Japan before a gradual roll-out to other regions.

Strategy Analytics predicts Sony's share of the worldwide video game market will narrow to 62 percent by 2010, from 66 percent now. Microsoft, now tied with Nintendo Co. Ltd at 17 percent, is expected to grow to 28 percent while Nintendo's hold is seen shrinking to 10 percent.

The prevailing view holds that the market is Sony's to lose, but it was only a little more than a decade ago when Sony was the new kid on the block and its original PlayStation console took on market Goliaths Nintendo and Sega.

This time around some common themes - pricing, desirable games and manufacturing efficiency - are still expected to play a role in determining the ultimate winner.

Pricing will be key for Sony.

The premium Xbox 360 sells for $400. Sony must find a price low enough to appeal to both gamers and mainstream consumers - who may choose the PS3 over significantly more expensive stand-alone Blu-ray players - without putting too much strain on its bottom line.

Sony's profits and ability to lower PS3 prices will also depend greatly on its manufacturing ability. This is easier said than done - just ask Microsoft.

Microsoft suffered from Xbox 360 supply constraints during its first holiday season and then saw production costs balloon in the past quarter as it ramped up shipments.

Sony plans to do a simultaneous global launch for PS3, something it did not do for the original PlayStation or the PS2. Sony aims to ship 6 million PS3 units by March 2007.

"Sony's being a little optimistic on how fast they can ramp to mass production," Peter Moore, the head of Microsoft's Xbox business, told Reuters in an interview.

Both companies understand that must-have games could play the most important role of all. In the past, blockbusters like the "Gran Turismo" franchise lured gamers to Sony's system, while the "Halo" games boosted sales for Microsoft.

"One game can turn the tide for a given system," said DFC Intelligence research analyst Alexis Madrigal.

"Halo" Sequel, New Titles Create Buzz at Game Show

While much of the attention at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo is focused on new hardware such as Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Co. Ltd's Wii, the success of the next generation of video game consoles will likely be determined by their game lineups.

E3, as the show is generally known, is the largest video game showcase in the world, and there are several titles whose presence, or lack thereof, could determine which console takes the lead in the next generation war for an industry whose revenue rivals Hollywood box office receipts.

The console war pits Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 against the upcoming PlayStation 3 from Sony and Nintendo's Wii, which is pronounced "We." The Xbox 360 and PS3 offer high-definition graphics and new speed and power, but the software is often what makes gamers purchase a system. Nintendo focuses on more child-friendly games whose characters are often more cartoonish than photorealistic.

The most anticipated title of the entire show is a game that won't be playable - the next installment in Microsoft's blockbuster "Halo" franchise. It is widely expected that Microsoft will show a video of "Halo 3" at its press conference on Tuesday, but the sci-fi game in which players shoot aliens won't likely ship to consumers until at least 2007.

"Halo" and "Halo 2," both for the original Xbox, have sold a combined 14.5 million units worldwide, according to Microsoft. The games were considered "killer apps," which drove sales of the original Xbox and helped the Xbox Live online service reach two million subscribers.

"Halo 2," which went on sale November 9, 2004, sold a record $125 million during the first 24 hours of its release, outpacing Hollywood's top earner.

Regardless of whether "Halo 3" makes an appearance, there are still many other games that could give software sales a much needed boost.

U.S. video game sales had experienced a sales decline for seven straight months through March, according to market research firm NPD Group. Several of the games on display this week could help turn the tide of game sales during the important holiday season.

"The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess" is the next of Nintendo's hugely popular game franchise for the GameCube. UbiSoft Entertainment SA's "Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent" is the next installment of the stealth action franchise for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Xbox and GameCube.

At Sony's news conference on Monday, arguably the largest audience reaction came from a video trailer for Konami Corp's "Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots," a stealth action title expected in 2007 for the PlayStation 3.

Microsoft also is making a huge push for "Gears of War," a highly anticipated sci-fi, horror action game from Epic Games that many think could fill the Halo gap in 2006.

"A lot of people are calling 'Gears of War' the 'Halo' for 2006," said Sam Kennedy, editor in chief of video game review site 1UP.com.

Kennedy says that while the big franchises like "Halo," "Metal Gear Solid" and "Zelda" are interesting, he is most excited by the largely unknown launch titles for Nintendo's Wii, which has generated buzz because of its motion sensitive controller.

"Nintendo has been saying they're going to change the way we play games, and people are waiting to see if that's the case," said Kennedy.

Video Game Console Wars Approach Climax

After years of promises and high expectations, consumers will finally be able to purchase next-generation video game consoles as the industry's painful transition to the latest technology comes to an end later this year.

In the fall, Sony Corp.'s PlayStation 3 and Nintendo Co.'s Wii systems are expected to join Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 on store shelves - a relief to game publishers who have seen sales plummet as consumers waited in recent months for the latest gear.

But as the hype is replaced by actual gaming systems, the latest "console wars" will enter a new phase, potentially shifting the balance of an industry whose total sales top Hollywood's domestic box office receipts.

During this week's Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, the big three console makers gave an important glimpse into the future - and further fueled questions about which maker will come up on top.

Will Sony's current dominance continue with its PlayStation 3 or will its high price tag send fans looking elsewhere? Will Microsoft's early release of its Xbox 360 snag it more market share? Or will the intuitive remote control that's offered with Nintendo's Wii prove to be the greatest draw?

On the exhibition floor, at least, Nintendo's sprawling booth appeared to be the hit of the show. Throngs of attendees crowded in lines that snaked around the Los Angeles Convention Center in order to get a first try at Wii games.

But Colin Sebastian, an analyst with Lazard Capital Markets, said he was particularly impressed with the inroads Microsoft has made in an industry

Sony dominated with its PlayStation 2. He predicted Microsoft and Sony each grabbing 40 percent of the next-generation market, with Nintendo keeping a strong hold on the remaining 20 percent.

In the more distant future, the video game business will only improve, predicted Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association, which organizes E3.

"The truth is it’s not terribly important how many units of hardware and software are sold in 2006," he said. "Don’t get me wrong - it is important to individual companies - but it is less important for the industry collectively. The real issue is how this year positions the industry for the future. That is, after all, what transitions are all about."

And in that regard, most see a lot of opportunity.

Shane Kim, general manager for Microsoft Game Studios, also predicted strong growth in the coming years.

"I think the signs are all positive," he said. "With the competition now finally entering the market later this year, I think it will start to remove that uncertainly so customers will be able to make some better decisions, because some have been waiting, frankly, wondering ’What are my options going to be?’"

According to market research firm NPD Group, overall video game sales dropped 5 percent to $7 billion in the U.S. last year as gamers waited for the new systems. Top game publishers such as Electronic Arts Inc., Activision Inc. and THQ Inc. have lost millions recently due to slow sales.

But tough times might not go away so quickly.

Availability, which plagued Microsoft’s Xbox 360 last fall, might turn out to be a continuing problem, particularly for Sony. With only 4 million PS3 units expected to be available through the end of the year, analysts and industry insiders already predict there will be shortages.

Consumers also could balk at the price tags, particularly on the PlayStation 3.

At its Nov. 17 launch, Sony will offer a $499 model that features a 20 gigabyte hard drive but not some important features such as a special output for high-definition video, a memory card slot and built-in wireless. Buyers will have to cough up $599 for those extras, plus a more spacious 60 gigabyte disk drive.

Though some critics say the console is too expensive, Sony has insisted the prices are suitable considering what’s under the hood.

"I think that it just demonstrates that the early adopters of this technology are much less price sensitive," Sebastian said. "You have a lot of first movers who are going to buy whatever Sony ships."

The PS3 will pack a Blu-ray disc drive for displaying high-definition graphics and movies, and a high-speed "Cell" processor promises high performance inside the sleek black or silver case.

The PS3 also has a controller that looks much like the one for the older PlayStation 2, but can be moved around to control action on the screen.

Control is the central element of Nintendo’s Wii (pronounced "we"), where button-encrusted controllers have been replaced with TV-remote style wands players simply wave around to hit tennis balls or steer off-road racers.

Nintendo officials said they’re focused on providing a platform for unique games rather than a high-tech, do-it-all networked media hub. The company has kept quiet on price, but some analysts have estimated it to cost between $200 and $300.

"What we are trying to do with the new machine is completely different from what Sony and Microsoft are trying to do," Nintendo Co. President Satoru Iwata said.

Microsoft, meanwhile, continues to offer the same two flavors of its Xbox 360, which debuted last November.

A "Core System" model without a hard drive comes in at $299, while the $399 model adds a hard drive but still lacks built-in wireless receiver (which remains a $100 add-on accessory). This week, the company said an HD-DVD drive for movies would be available by the end of the year.

The key element to which system succeeds will be the video games themselves.

While the manufacturers generally sell the consoles for a loss, they recoup the costs through licensing agreements and sales of software and accessories. Online capabilities are adding new revenue streams such as micropayments for additional game chapters and virtual items.

Each manufacturer announced a lineup of exclusive games that includes "Super Mario Galaxy" for the Wii, the shooter "Gears of War" for Xbox 360 and the frenetic action game "Heavenly Sword" for PS3.

Video Games’ Impact on US Economy $18 Billion

The video game industry, which supported 144,000 full-time jobs and accounted for more than $8 billion in game sales in 2004, had an $18 billion impact on the U.S. economy that year, according to a new study to be released on Wednesday.

Estimates call for video game sales to grow to $15 billion by 2010. Industry employment is expected to leap nearly 75 percent to 250,000 jobs by 2009.

The study, written by Robert Crandall of the Brookings Institution and J. Gregory Sidak of the Georgetown University Law Center, was funded by the Entertainment Software Association and will be discussed at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles.

The authors found that direct and indirect contributions of entertainment software to the nation’s gross national output, a measure of the value of goods and services produced in an economy, exceeded $18 billion in 2004 - a figure they said would steadily increase as the industry grows.

The North America video game market, including sales of games and players such as consoles and hand-held devices, was valued at $12.6 billion in 2005

and is forecast to expand to $17.2 billion by 2010, according to research firm DFC Intelligence.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Poll: 4 in 10 Americans Play Video Games

Rather than reach for the television remote control when she wants to be entertained, Karalyn Valente goes online to play "EverQuest," "Ultima Online" and other video games - a gaming habit shared by millions in the United States.

Valente, a 29-year-old graphic artist from York, Pa., said she devotes about 30 hours a week in vast online worlds and spent more than $1,500 on games last year.

"I watch less and less TV. I turn it on and the shows are just idiotic," Valente said. "When I play the games, I actually look through the character's eyes. I actually become the character."

According to a new AP-AOL Games poll, 40 percent of American adults play games on a computer or a console. Men, younger adults and minorities were most likely to play those games.

Among those who describe themselves as gamers, 45 percent play over the Internet. And more than a third of online gamers spent more than $200 last year on gaming, compared with nearly a quarter of those who don't play games online.

Online gamers also spent more time playing those games.

Forty-two percent of online gamers said they spent at least four hours playing games during an average week, compared with 26 percent of those who don't play online. About one in six online gamers play more than 10 hours a week.

The survey results come as Sony Corp., Nintendo Co. and Microsoft Corp. prepare to push their new consoles this week at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles. All three are hoping to make broad online features such as multiplayer games, video conferencing and downloadable content a core element of the video game experience.

Casual games like board or card games were the most popular, followed by strategy games, action sports, adventure, first-person shooters and simulations, the poll found. Casual, strategy and role-playing games were most popular among online gamers.

And that game playing can be expensive.

Cameron Wright's gaming cost more than $4,500 last year, most of that on

upgrades to two of his four PCs.

More than a fourth of gamers say they spent nothing on that hobby last year and slightly more, 31 percent, spent $100 or less.

Only 11 percent spent more than $500 last year. Online gamers are more likely to have spent more than $500 last year compared with gamers who don’t play online. Six in 10 hardcore gamers - those who play three or more hours per week - spent $200 or less on games last year.

Although Wright usually spends about two hours a week on gaming, he said he sometimes makes extra time for adult-themed military strategy games like "Command and Conquer," which he plays online with friends.

"Once you start, they get quite intricate," said Wright, a 44-year-old investment manager from Indianapolis. "You’re looking at four to five hours a night."

Of those who play online games, nearly one in five said they had formed ongoing friendships or relationships with fellow gamers they did not know before, the poll found.

Valente said she met her roommate and her boyfriend in online games and regularly uses special computer software called TeamSpeak to talk with teammates and friends in the game worlds.

"I’ve met a lot of strangers online and become friends with them," she said. "I have friends that have been online for years."

Wright, meanwhile, said the family PlayStation 2 has become the center of entertainment for him and his four young children.

"With the PS2 we find ourselves sitting down and passing it around from one person to another doing round-robin tournaments," Wright said. "The kids just eat that up. The big competition is who gets through that level first."

The AP-AOL Games poll of 3,024 U.S. adults, including 1,046 gamers, was conducted by Ipsos, an international polling firm, on April 18-20 and 24-27. For the gamers, the poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

NYC Fires Employee for Surfing the Web

Despite a judge’s recommendation that he only receive a reprimand, a city worker accused of disregarding warnings to stay off the Internet at work has been fired.

The office computer of Toquir Choudhri, a 14-year veteran of the Department of Education, had been used to visit news and travel Web sites.

Last month, Administrative Law Judge John Spooner ruled that surfing the Web at work is equivalent to reading a newspaper or talking on the phone.

He recommended the lightest possible punishment for Choudhri. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein disagreed.

"The penalty of termination is appropriate and not shocking to one's sense of fairness," Klein said Friday.

Choudhri's "abuse of the Internet at the time he is supposed to be performing his job demonstrates his disinterest in the job," Klein said.

Choudhri's lawyer, Martin Druyan, called the firing a "political decision."

"It's unfair, it's shocking to the conscience and it's contrary to the facts and the law," he said.

"Botmaster" Gets Nearly Five Years in Prison

A 20-year-old who prosecutors say highjacked computers to damage computer networks and send waves of spam across the Internet was sentenced on Monday to nearly five years in prison.

Jeanson James Ancheta, a well-known member of the "Botmaster Underground" who pleaded guilty in January to federal charges of conspiracy, fraud and damaging U.S. government computers, was given the longest sentence for spreading computer viruses, federal prosecutors said.

He was sentenced to 57 months in prison and three years of supervised release by U.S. District Judge Gary Klausner, who also ordered him to pay $15,000 in restitution to the U.S. Naval Air Warfare Center in China Lake, California, and forfeit to the government some $60,000 in illicit gains.

"Your worst enemy is your own intellectual arrogance that somehow the world cannot touch you on this," Klausner said in sentencing Ancheta.

Ancheta was accused in the original 17-count indictment of hijacking some 500,000 computers using "bots," or programs that surreptitiously install themselves on computers so they can be controlled by a hacker.

A bot net is a network of such robot, or "zombie," computers, which can harness their collective power to do considerable damage or send out huge amounts of junk e-mail.

Prosecutors say the case was unique because Ancheta was accused of profiting from his attacks by selling access to his "bot nets" to other hackers and planting adware, software that causes advertisements to pop up, into infected computers.

In entering the guilty pleas, Ancheta admitted using computer servers he controlled to transmit malicious code over the Web to scan for and exploit vulnerable computers, which he then controlled as "zombie" machines.

U.K. Will Ship Accused Hacker to U.S.

A British court on Wednesday approved a request by the U.S. to extradite an unemployed systems administrator who allegedly caused $700,000 in damage by hacking into U.S. military and government computers.

Gary McKinnon, 40, of London, is accused of deleting data and illegally accessing information on U.S. government computers between February 2001 and March 2002. Prosecutors allege McKinnon significantly disrupted government computers, causing damage that jeopardized U.S. military networks.

British investigators seized McKinnon’s computers in March 2002. McKinnon admitted installing remote access software on computers he targeted in the U.S.

The U.S. filed an extradition request after British officials decided not to prosecute McKinnon because the alleged crimes occurred within the U.S.

McKinnon’s attorneys fought extradition, fearing that he could be classed as an enemy combatant and be held indefinitely, awaiting trial by a military court.

The U.S. said McKinnon will not be held as an enemy combatant, and will face trial in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia.

In Bow Street Magistrates’ Court in London on Wednesday, Judge Nicholas Evans rejected arguments that McKinnon could be subjected to torture and inhuman treatment in the U.S. Evans referred the case to British Secretary of State John Reid to decide whether McKinnon will be extradited.

McKinnon, who remains free on bail, said before the hearing that he would appeal. Before leaving the court, McKinnon hugged friends and relatives attending the hearing.

The soft-spoken McKinnon maintains he didn’t damage the computers, owned by the U.S. Army and Navy, the Department of Defense and the NASA space agency. McKinnon, who used the name "Solo" during his exploits, has said he was researching UFOs.

McKinnon used a program called "RemotelyAnywhere" to control other computers, accessing administrator accounts and gaining passwords for 39 of the 97 computers he is accused of hacking, British court documents said.

U.S. officials charge McKinnon’s actions went beyond mere snooping. They allege McKinnon deleted files from computers at the U.S. Naval Weapons Station Earle in New Jersey, causing the shutdown of 300 computers at a "critical" time after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

British investigators said McKinnon admitted to leaving a note on a U.S. Army computer that read "U.S. foreign policy is akin to government-sponsored terrorism these days.... I am Solo. I will continue to disrupt at the highest levels."

Joint US, European Crackdown on Internet Pedophilia

Police in Europe and the United States have searched 150 homes in a dozen countries in a coordinated crackdown on Internet pedophilia and child pornography, Europol announced.

The pan-European police body did not say if any arrests were carried out Wednesday, but in the Netherlands alone police said they had seized dozens of computer hard drives, digital cameras, CD-Roms and data storage devices from 21 homes.

Codenamed "Baleno," the operation was initiated by Dutch police, who have supplied information to 76 countries around the world. In Europe, the investigation was coordinated by Europol, and in the United States by the FBI.

The crackdown was carried out in the United States and 11 European countries - Austria, Belgium, Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands.

The operation started last year when investigators ran into high-tech protective mechanisms while trying to infiltrate an online pedophilia network, leading to the discovery of some 2,500 Internet addresses which had been used to download child pornography.

Spammers Breaking the Law, UK Judge Rules

People who bombard innocent victims with a blizzard of unsolicited "spam" e-mails are breaking the law and could face up to five years in jail, London’s High Court ruled on Thursday.

In a test case that puts spammers in the same league as people who send computer viruses, two judges said that these cyber-spammers could be prosecuted for their activities under the 1990 Computer Misuse Act.

The ruling came as the two overturned a district judge’s previous ruling that 18-year-old David Lennon had no case to answer after being accused of using a computer program to send five million e-mails to a firm which had fired him.

The judges said that while a computer user might consent to being sent some e-mails, that consent did not extend to receiving a barrage of such messages.

Ruling that the extent of consent should be decided on a case-by-case, the judges said it plainly did not cover e-mails sent intentionally to jam a receiving computer rather than for the purpose of communication.

The case must now go back to the original court to be reconsidered.

New Federal Cybercrime Bill Inadequate

New proposed federal legislation intended to help law enforcement agencies fight cybercrime falls short because it does not give consumers tools to

guard against identity theft, a lawmaker and a consumer advocate said Friday.

The Cyber-Security Enhancement and Consumer Data Protection Act, introduced earlier this week, would be inadequate as a stand-alone cybersecurity bill because it does not require companies with data breaches to notify affected consumers, and it does not allow consumers to freeze their credit when they've been victims of ID theft, said Susanna Montezemolo, policy analyst for Consumers Union.

"One question we ask when we consider federal legislation is, 'Will this make consumers better off?'" Montezemolo said during a hearing on the bill. "The legislation does address some of the broader consumer issues, such as notifying individuals... so that they can take steps to avoid or detect, at a much earlier time, identity theft."

The bill H.R. 5318, sponsored by House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisconsin), would allow fines or five-year jail sentences for people who fail to report to federal law enforcement authorities large data breaches involving personal information. The bill would triple the maximum jail sentence to 30 years for first-time offenders convicted of computer fraud, and it would allow federal law enforcement officials to charge organized cybercrime groups with racketeering.

The bill would also increase funding for federal cybercrime programs, and it would spell out a prohibition against taking over computers remotely to create so-called botnets.

The legislation is needed because cybercriminals are becoming increasingly inventive, said Representative Howard Coble (R-North Carolina), a cosponsor of the bill and chairman of the Judiciary Committee's Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security Subcommittee, where the bill was debated Thursday.

"One thing we know about Internet fraudsters is, they are a sophisticated and intelligent group of criminals," said Coble.

But the bill doesn't go far enough, said Montezemolo and Representative Robert Scott (D-Virginia). Scott called for additions that would allow consumers to check the accuracy of the data held by data brokers, credit agencies, and other companies, as well as a data breach notification provision.

If the Sensenbrenner bill is married to another breach notification bill, Congress should continue to allow states to pass their own breach notification laws, Scott said. Close to 30 states have passed breach notification bills after a rash of breaches were made public in early 2005.

Other bills before Congress include data breach notification provisions, but a bill approved in March by the House Financial Services Committee would preempt stronger state laws, Scott and Montezemolo said. The Financial Data Protection Act would require companies to report data breaches only after they determine the breaches pose a significant risk to consumers, Montezemolo said.

"We call this the 'don't know, don't tell' policy," she said. "Because if the company doesn't know whether consumers can be harmed, they don't have to notify them."

Others testifying before the subcommittee praised the Sensenbrenner bill. The legislation is a "good first step toward punishing" cybercriminals,

said Joseph LaRocca, vice president for loss prevention at the National Retail Federation.

Search Engines Lax In Stopping Spyware

The major Internet search engines often direct users to risky sites that can put them at risk of spyware and other malicious software, a study released by a tech security firm said.

The report by McAfee Inc. suggested that the five major search engines did little to protect Web users from going to risky sites, and in fact directed US users to potentially harmful sites 285 million times a month.

The risk of hitting a dangerous site soared to as much as 72 percent in results for certain popular keywords, such as "free screensavers", "digital music", "popular software", and "singers", according to the report.

The study also found that "sponsored" results - those paid for by advertisers - are more dangerous than non-sponsored results. On average, 8.5 percent of sponsored links were found to be dangerous versus 3.1 percent of non-sponsored links, McAfee said.

"Search engines clearly play a critical role in Internet use: As a convenient starting point for online browsing, they’re estimated to account for about half of all site visits," said Chris Dixon, who heads the McAfee SiteAdvisor product team.

"But economically motivated purveyors of spam, adware and other online problems quickly follow where consumers go online, in this case directly to search engine results. Today, based on browsing trends, we estimate that US Internet users make 285 million clicks to hostile sites every month through search queries."

The investigation, described as the first comprehensive study of online search safety, looked at the five major search engines - Google, Yahoo, MSN, AOL and Ask.com between January and April.

"Search engines are too important to become just another online activity dominated by the worst elements on the Internet," study author Ben Edelman said.

"Users need and deserve a way to search safely, and the security community can help."

Yahoo Turns to Washington for Help on China

Yahoo Inc. said on Thursday it was seeking the U.S. government’s help in urging China to allow more media freedom, after reports linking information it gave to Chinese authorities with the jailing of a dissident.

Last month, the Internet media company was cited in a Chinese court decision to jail an Internet writer for 10 years for subversion in 2003 - the fourth such case to surface implicating Yahoo.

Yahoo Chairman and Chief Executive Terry Semel said it had no choice but to comply with local laws and did not have the power to change Chinese policy.

"We tried, and we are going to continue to try as an industry to have our government help us," he told New York media executives at a Newhouse School event.

He said that closing down Yahoo's operations in China would not help boost free speech.

"In my mind one of the equalizers to lack of information happens to be the Internet," he said.

He also said he hoped other news and publishing companies doing business in China would stay despite the limitations.

"You have to get whatever news you possibly can into China as opposed to pulling back," he said. "Will they be edited? Yes. Should you go home? No."

The case was the latest to highlight conflicts of profits and principles for Internet companies in China, the world's No. 2 Internet market.

Web search leader Google Inc. has come under fire for saying it would block politically sensitive terms on its new China site, bowing to conditions set by Beijing.

The Chinese government routinely monitors chat forums and online bulletin boards for controversial political comments, censoring words such as "freedom" and "democracy."

The New York-based press watchdog Committee to Protect Journalists has said China was the world's leading jailer of journalists last year for the seventh straight year, with 32 behind bars.

House Bill Might Ban MySpace, Friendster

A Pennsylvania congressman has introduced legislation that would ban minors from accessing social networking websites such as MySpace, and forbid libraries from making such access available.

The bill, known as the "Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006," was introduced Wednesday in the House by Michael G. Fitzpatrick (R-Penn), a first-term representative. The bill has also been labeled as H.R. 5319, a Fitzpatrick representative said Thursday.

However, the bill uses extremely broad language to define a "social networking" site, which would theoretically eliminate several Ziff-Davis websites, as well as other highly-trafficked Web sites across the Internet.

"Sites like Myspace and Facebook have opened the door to a new online community of social networks between friends, students and colleagues," Fitzpatrick said in a statement posted to his web site. "However, this new technology has become a feeding ground for child predators that use these sites as just another way to do our children harm."

H.R. 5319 forms part of the Republican Surburban Agenda, part of a

multi-bill initiative supported by the Speaker of the House, J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL). To date, the Agenda encompasses seven bills, ranging from one permitting 401K accounts to be begun at birth, to an act that would set down guidelines to prevent schools hiring pedophiles, to acts that would manage farmland and open space.

The "Deleting Online Predators Act" would also require the FCC to publish a sort of annual blacklist of "commercial social networking websites and chat rooms that have been shown to allow sexual predators easy access to personal information of, and contact with, children."

Within the bill, the definition of "social networking site" is left somewhat vague.

In an effort to prevent minors from viewing child pornography, the bill would bar minors from accessing a social networking site, defined as one that "allows users to create web pages or profiles that provide information about themselves and are available to other users; and offers a mechanism for communication with other users, such as a forum, chat room, email, or instant messenger."

The language of the bill, however, may still be modified before it is formally voted upon. "It still has to go through a tough markup process," Jeff Urbanchuk, Fitsgerald’s press secretary, told PC Magazine. "It’s only 72 hours old, you know."

The second key definition of the Deleting Online Predators Act, "chat room," is defined more conventionally. "’[C]hat rooms’ means Internet websites through which a number of users can communicate in real time via text and that allow messages to be almost immediately visible to all other users or to a designated segment of all other users."

The bill would also create an eight-member advisory board to the FCC, which would be staffed by four members of the private sector, with the remaining members drawn from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Crimes against Children Research Center, school boards, and primary and secondary school educators, respectively.

Finally, the bill would require the government to set up a web site warning of the dangers of social networking.

Internet Agency Rejects ’.xxx’ Domain Name

Faced with opposition from conservative groups and some pornography Web sites, the Internet’s key oversight agency voted Wednesday to reject a proposal to create a red-light district on the Internet.

The decision from the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers reverses its preliminary approval last June to create a ".xxx" domain name for voluntary use by the adult entertainment industry.

ICANN had postponed making a final decision in August after the U.S. government stepped in just days before a scheduled meeting to underscore objections it had received, an intervention that had led some ICANN critics to question the organization’s independence.

"The board was certainly very conscious of that (the controversy) ... but

the heart of the decision today was not driven by a political consideration," ICANN Chief Executive Paul Twomey said in an interview that followed more than an hour of discussion in a closed teleconference meeting.

Twomey said the decision largely came down to whether the creation of "xxx" might put ICANN in a difficult position of having to enforce all of the world's laws governing pornography, including ones that might require porn sites to use the domain. Speech-related laws, he noted, often conflict with one another.

He said concerns raised by various governments around the world did prompt the company proposing the domain, ICM Registry Inc. of Jupiter, Fla., to make changes in its bid, but the changes did not address all of the questions concerning enforcement.

ICANN's rejection of ".xxx" in a 9-5 vote ends, for now, a 6-year-old effort by ICM to establish a domain for the porn industry. ICANN first tabled its bid in 2000 out of fear it would be getting into content control.

ICM resubmitted its bid in 2004, this time structuring it with a policy-setting organization to free ICANN of that task. But the language of the proposed contract was vague, Twomey said, and a majority of the board felt that one interpretation could kick the task back to ICANN.

When the board initially voted last year to move forward with ".xxx," the contract details had yet to be written.

ICM argued the domain would help the $12 billion online porn industry clean up its act. Those using the domain would have to abide by yet-to-be-written rules designed to bar such trickery as spamming and malicious scripts.

Anti-porn advocates, however, countered that sites would be free to keep their current ".com" address, in effect making porn more easily accessible by creating yet another channel to house it.

And they say such a domain name would legitimize adults sites, which 2 in 5 Internet users visit each month, according to tracking by comScore Media Metrix.

Many porn sites also objected, fearing that such a domain would pave the way for governments - the United States or repressive regimes abroad - or even private industry to filter speech that is protected here under the First Amendment.

Democratic Sens. Max Baucus of Montana and Mark Pryor of Arkansas have introduced legislation that would create a mandatory ".xxx."

The porn industry trade group Free Speech Coalition believes a domain name for kids-friendly sites would be more appropriate.

Twomey said the board took the porn sites' concerns as a sign ICM did not fully represent the industry, a criteria required in the current round of domains.

Meanwhile, ICANN approved the creation of a domain name designed to help people manage their contact information online.

As envisioned, Internet users could buy a ".tel" name and set up a Web site

with their latest digits - home, cell and work phone numbers, home and work e-mail addresses, instant messaging handles and perhaps even a MySpace profile.

The ".tel" domain could appear in use as early as this year.

MySpace.com Founders Among Webby Winners

The founders of the popular social networking site MySpace.com are among the winners of this year’s Webby online achievement awards.

Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe will receive an award next month for breakout of the year. The winners were announced Tuesday in advance of next month’s ceremony.

Largely through word of mouth, their site now has nearly 77 million registered users and eclipses most Web sites in traffic, including Google Inc.’s search engine. It even got the attention of News Corp., the media conglomerate controlled by Rupert Murdoch, which bought Intermix Media Inc. for its MySpace business for $580 million in cash last year.

"Everyone is using it, from politicians to rock stars to students to people of all ages," said Tiffany Shlain, the founder of the Webby Awards, billed in some circles as the Oscars for the Internet.

She said the breakout category "is really about a site that becomes pervasive in our culture."

Other special-achievement recipients include Robert Kahn for lifetime achievement. Kahn, along with Vint Cerf, invented the Internet’s key communications protocols, known as TCP/IP.

Thomas Friedman, a columnist for The New York Times and author of "The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century," was named person of the year.

The artist-of-the-year award went to Gorillaz, a cartoon-fronted rock group billed as a pioneer in fusing music and animation.

Mark Cuban, a billionaire Internet businessman who also owns the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, was named entrepreneur of the year. Organizers credited his role as an "evangelist for the power of technology to drive change."

Winners were named in about 70 other business, consumer and culture categories.

Google’s map products won in three categories - for best visual design/function, for broadband and for services. Last year’s breakout winner, Yahoo Inc.’s Flickr photo sharing site, won this year for best navigation/structure and best practices, while the company also picked up an honor for its podcasts.

The British Broadcasting Corp. won for community and news, and National Public Radio was honored for radio and religion/spirituality, namely its "This I Believe" audio segments.

The Katrina Help Center, a collaboration of Cisco Systems Inc. and the nonprofit One Economy, will receive an award for best charitable organization.

The awards, in their 10th year, are given by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, a group of more than 550 experts on the Internet and other specialties, including musician David Bowie and RealNetworks Inc. Chief Executive Rob Glaser.

The award ceremony, scheduled for June 12 in New York, is known for its zany tone. Winners are limited to five-word acceptance speeches. Lifetime achievement recipient Al Gore drew laughs and headlines last year with "Please don't recount this vote."

Philadelphia OKs Wireless Internet Project

City Council on Thursday unanimously approved a plan to blanket the city's 135 square miles with a high-speed wireless Internet connection, a measure that mayor is expected to sign soon.

If the system is fully deployed by the third quarter of 2007 as planned, Philadelphia would be the first large city to have its own wireless Internet network. EarthLink Inc. will build, operate and maintain the network under a 10-year contract.

"Philadelphia is a city of many firsts and this is a first as well," said Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown. "It's the first time a large municipality is saying we'll take an aggressive role in ensuring that the digital divide is bridged."

EarthLink will start building the network in June over a 15-square-mile test area that would cover parts of North and South Philadelphia. The test should take three to four months, said Clifton Roscoe, director of major projects for EarthLink.

Councilman Brian O'Neill said EarthLink has the choice to get out of the deal if the company doesn't like the results of the trial. But he added that he believes EarthLink will succeed.

The Internet service provider's first target would be the city's quarter-million dial-up customers plus existing broadband subscribers who want to pay lower prices, O'Neill said.

Community-based organizations will reach out to low-income households to get them interested.

Atlanta-based EarthLink will invest $22 million over a decade to provide Wi-Fi in the city. Prices are expected at $20 a month, or $9.95 for low-income households. EarthLink has agreed to lease capacity to rival Internet service providers.

About 300 communities across the country are developing or have deployed Wi-Fi plans. Chicago and San Francisco also are planning big public Wi-Fi projects.

O'Neill said having citywide Wi-Fi will attract business and leisure travelers to Philadelphia.

"This puts us at the top of the list," he said.

As Freedom Shrinks, Teens Seek MySpace To Hang Out

They paper their virtual walls with kittens and cartoon characters, give their address as Candyland, their age as 103 and announce they are yearning for true love.

Welcome to the secret, yet very public, world of young teens who are flocking to social-networking Internet sites both to chill with friends and to figure out the timeless adolescent question "Who am I?"

Although originally aimed at 20-somethings interested in independent music, Web sites like MySpace.com, which is owned by News Corp, have attracted an enormous following among middle school students, and cultural theorists say it’s not hard to see why.

As the real world is perceived as more dangerous with child abductors lurking on every corner, kids flock online to hang out with friends, express their hopes and dreams and bare their souls with often painful honesty - mostly unbeknownst to their tech-clumsy parents.

"We have a complete culture of fear," said Danah Boyd, 28, a Ph.D student and social media researcher at the University of California Berkeley. "Kids really have no place where they are not under constant surveillance."

Driven to and from school, chaperoned at parties and often lacking public transport, today’s middle-class American kids are no longer free to hang out unsupervised at the park, the bowling alley or to bike around the neighborhood they way they did 20 years ago.

"A lot of that coming-of-age stuff in public is gone. So kids are creating social spaces within all this controlled space," said Boyd.

The ranks of Santa Monica, California-based MySpace.com has swollen to more than 73 million members in two years, making it the second-biggest Web domain after Yahoo in terms of page views. Other popular teen sites are Friendster.com, Tagged.com, Xanga.com and Orkut.com.

Most MySpace members live in the United States but a British version was launched this year and Australia will be next.

More than half of 15- to 20-year-olds who are online are using MySpace, according to the company’s research. They use the site’s design technology to create personal "spaces" that resemble a cross between a high school locker and a secret diary.

Researchers say older teens and 20-somethings use the site more for friendship, sharing music and arranging meetings and parties.

The younger set use it to chill with known friends and work out their own identity. Some construct fantasy lives of vast wages, luxury cars and say they are searching for "live-in pimps." Others confess touchingly to being geeks, loving uncool movies like "The Sound of Music" or list their puppy as their lover.

"Building identity is a lot of what a teen-ager is. The majority feel they don't fit in," said networking consultant Ross Dawson, chairman of Future Exploration Network.

"This is the first generation for which it is entirely natural to socialize in a digital environment. Mobile phones, instant messaging, texting and being online really are their life support," Dawson said.

Under-14s are not supposed to use MySpace but tens of thousands ignore that stipulation, inventing ages and high school careers still beyond their reach, and sometimes posting sexually precocious pictures.

To meet concern over possible sexual exploitation of children, MySpace hired a safety czar in April and requires under-18s to review safety tips before registering. It also restricts the profiles of under-16s to users they know.

It says it has deleted more than 250,000 profiles of under-14-year-olds since 2004 on the basis of tips by parents and algorithms that search the site looking for keywords and phrases that identify very young users.

"We are now deleting something like 5,000 under-age profiles a day," said Shawn Gold, head of marketing for MySpace.

Gold said the dangers should be kept in perspective. "If MySpace were a state it would be twice the size of California, but the crime associated with it would be a five-block area of New York City."

For all the adult alarm over the coarse language and provocative poses often seen on such sites, Boyd said teens are doing just what they have always done.

"Adults are not normally privy to these teen-age expressions. But when teens hang out in public they do these stupid things and they always have.

"Teens are trying to figure out their sexuality for better or worse. It's a problem for parents to pretend like it doesn't exist. If parents have an open mind and can hear their teens expressing themselves in all their ridiculousness, they can make sense of it and it stops being so scary," she said.

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